

Channel Catfish

Ictalurus punctatus

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Channel catfish are the largest member of the catfish family in Manitoba; monsters over 10 kg are common. They are easily distinguished from other Manitoba catfish by their deeply forked tail. Their colour ranges from dusty-grey to dark grey-blue, often with scattered dark spots.

Channel catfish use their barbels like a nose to find food. There is a common misconception that they are bottom-feeders that scavenge on waste. Although some of their food including clams and crayfish is found on the bottom, they are active hunters. Manitoba's large channel cats catch fish, especially goldeye, while smaller individuals catch insects and minnows.

Another common misconception is that channel catfish thrive in polluted waters. On the contrary, industrial and municipal waste discharges, and barriers that restrict movement to spawning and feeding areas, destroy channel catfish habitat.

Spawning takes place at about 25°C in dark nests under rocks, logs, and undercut banks. The male channel catfish fans water over the eggs to aerate and clean them. Once they hatch, he protects the young for several days until they swim off to feed.

The flesh of channel catfish is in high demand in the United States. It is white, flaky, and quite rich. In the southern states large commercial farms raise millions of channel catfish each year and are still unable to meet the demand. In Manitoba, channel catfish are not a target of commercial fishermen, although some are harvested from nets set for other species.

Many anglers who have accidentally caught channel catfish have become avid catfish fishermen. The preferred technique in Manitoba is still-fishing with a single hook and bait such as goldeye or shrimp. The Red River and its tributaries are the most popular locations. So, next time you have the urge to fly to some exotic fishing spot, stop and think for a minute - somewhere within an hour drive of Winnipeg is a huge channel catfish just waiting to test your strength.

warm water species